

by Lt. Stephen Ures

In the lore of naval aviation, the only two things a good wingman should ever say are, “Two,” and “Sir, you’re on fire!” The qualities of a good wingman are taught from day one, and the importance of good wing-manship is emphasized in everything we do.

It was the winter of 2000, and we were well into work-ups for a WestPac cruise that would start that summer. As a nugget with four months in the squadron, I suddenly was flying some very complex training missions, using many F-14D systems for the first time.

We were flying a division low-level ingress at 500 feet through North Carolina, using a battle-box formation. The plan was to pop to a medium altitude in the Navy Dare Target Area and deliver our Mk-76 practice bombs by section. I was flying as Dash 2 with a weapons-school instructor in the backseat. We were well into the route at 480 knots when the start-valve light came on, indicating the starter was engaged. We climbed to troubleshoot. While I checked to make sure the engine-crank switch was off, my RIO broke out the pocket checklist. He read through the section about start-valve lights but only found procedures that were associated with an actual engine start. We elected to pull the start-valve circuit breaker, which extinguished the light, and continued with the flight.

About five minutes later, after I did some simulated SAM-defense maneuvers, the right throttle seized at mil. The engine instruments flashed, then went to zero. That did it for me, as I told my lead, “Dash 2’s aborting with a stuck throttle.” Without hesitation, he came off the route with me and instructed Dash 3 and 4 to continue. We both climbed and pointed toward NAS Oceana. After getting well away from the ground, I managed to force the right throttle back to idle. There were no engine indications, and my lead, who had now become my wingman, noticed the right nozzle oscillating.


So far, my limited intelligence had not singled out any procedure to follow. Fortunately, my

wingman was close. I’m told that fire coming out of the daily door of an F-14D doesn’t really look like fire, but what came out next probably saved our aircraft.

“You’re on fire; do your procedures, now!” he yelled. That made things simple. We executed the engine-fire procedures, deployed the emergency fire extinguisher, and continued on for an arrested landing at Oceana.

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It turned out that the starter actually had engaged, receiving high-pressure air from the engine well in excess of its operating limits. It then exploded, blowing a two-foot-square hole in the daily door, severing the lines for throttle control and the engine instruments. The fire never migrated high enough in the engine compartment to trigger a fire light. By the time we’d have figured out we were on fire, the damage could have been catastrophic.

My wingman provided the information at a critical moment, and his unhesitating decision to stay with me was the one that saved my aircraft. My lesson? Never, sacrifice section integrity, because there are just too many ways a good wingman can save your butt. 

Lt. Ures flies with VF-31.

Two F-14 Tomcat fighter jets are shown in formation, flying from left to right. The jets are white with grey accents and have "NAVY" written on the side. They are carrying various missiles and fuel tanks. The background is a blue sky with soft, white clouds. The word "Wingman" is written in a large, elegant, cursive script across the middle of the image, overlapping the jets.

Wingman

Photo composite by Yvonne Dawson